

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-3

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2 in Nicaragua Crash May Be American

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 2 — Two men killed when a helicopter was shot down over Nicaragua on Saturday are believed to be Americans, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said today.

Earlier in the day, a high-ranking Nicaraguan official said that Nicaragua suspected that one of the helicopter's passengers was an American intelligence agent who was working with anti-Government rebels. The official, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega Saavedra, said that the helicopter was downed after attacking a military training base.

Mr. Moynihan, a New York Democrat who is vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said he was informed by the Central Intelligence Agency today that two of the victims were believed to be American mercenaries working for Nicaraguan rebels.

Mr. Moynihan said he had been told by C.I.A. officials that the two men had not been directly or indirectly associated with the agency.

He said the agency had told him that the two men were part of a group of seven who went to Honduras last week from New Orleans to help the Nicaraguan rebels based in Honduras. Nicaragua said that three men were aboard the helicopter, and that no identification for them had been found.

Identities Unknown

The agency, according to Mr. Moynihan, does not know the identity of any of the seven Americans.

There have been previously been no known American deaths in Nicaragua associated with three-year-old Nicaraguan rebel fight against the Sandinista government. The Reagan Administration has provided millions of dollars of support to the rebels since 1981. Congress has become increasingly concerned about the American involvement, and the House has voted four times in the last year to deny further money to the rebels.

Mr. Moynihan, who inquired about the deaths at the request of a reporter, said the C.I.A. had told him that no C.I.A. agents were involved in the rebel raid Saturday against a Nicaraguan military installation in Santa Clara, in northwestern Nicaragua.

In addition, Mr. Moynihan said intelligence officials had told him they prohibit any of their employees from operating inside Nicaragua. He said this had been standing C.I.A. policy since the agency began providing financial support, weapons, ammunition and advice to the rebels in 1981.

C.I.A. Is Investigating

Mr. Moynihan said the agency was looking into the circumstances surrounding the raid and the downing of the helicopter as well as the involvement of the American mercenaries.

He said the C.I.A. had no detailed information about the seven men who arrived in Honduras last week from New Orleans.

It has been unclear for several years exactly what role mercenaries have played in the Nicaraguan conflict. Intelligence officials have said that the rebels have used mercenaries in the past to supplement their forces, particularly to help in sophisticated military operations, but the officials have maintained that the C.I.A. was not involved in the hiring or management of the mercenaries.

However, citing cutbacks in its budget and staff, the C.I.A. has relied on a number of so-called contract agents and private corporations, some formed with the assistance of the agency, to help provide American aid to the rebels. It has not been clear where the agency draws the line between private individuals and organizations with which it works and mercenaries, who are also involved in the helping the rebels.

The helicopter that was shot down flew over Santa Clara, Mr. Moynihan said he was told, after ground forces attacked the Nicaraguan military camp there. He said the helicopter had ap-

parently been on a reconnaissance mission to see what damage had been done by the raiding party.

As \$24 million that Congress approved last year for rebel operations during 1984 has run down in recent months, C.I.A. officials have told members of Congress that the agency's active involvement with the rebels has diminished significantly.

Before the money started to run out, the agency maintained a large operation in Honduras to help the rebels manage their fight against the Government, but agency officials have said that the number of intelligence employees still in Honduras has fallen to less than 10.

Mr. Moynihan said that intelligence officials had told him that they remained in communication with the rebels, permitting them to find out what had happened to the helicopter Saturday. He said, however, that the C.I.A. had told him that its people were not involved in any way in planning or carrying out the raid.

The role and location of the C.I.A. employees have been sensitive subjects in Congress in recent months after the disclosure earlier this year that C.I.A. agents aboard an American ship off the coast of Nicaragua had directed the mining of Nicaraguan harbors.

Many members of Congress who have gone along with C.I.A. in support for the rebels were angered over the direct involvement of agency officers in the planning and execution of the mining.